

# Testing the Waters: Indigenous Ecotours in Venezuela



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## *Keane Shore*

It was a memorable holiday. The jungle travellers had already dined on alligator, piranha, cassava, manioc, and other local delicacies. They had watched traditional dances and a blowgun competition, and traded for local handicrafts.

But as the group of seven headed down a churning river in a bongo, a long narrow canoe-like boat filled with few life jackets, fewer paddles, and a balky motor, [Beth Rohr](#) felt her knuckles whiten. Trying to stay calm, she recalled the advice of another ecotourist: "In the wilds of southern Venezuela, the ABC's of ecotourism are 'Always Be Cool' — take things as they come."

## **Inaugural tour**

Rohr was sent on the inaugural ecotour operated by indigenous Venezuelan villages on behalf of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Her job was to evaluate the last stage of a research project funded by the [Organizacion Regional de Pueblos Indigenas de Amazonas](#) (ORPIA) and the [Canadian National Aboriginal Tourism Association](#) (CNATA), with technical assistance from IDRC.

The pilot trip showed that developing ecotourism has potential, primarily with travellers in search of adventure. ORPIA, a cooperative indigenous organization, hopes to bring a sustainable flow of tourists to the Amazonas region, home to the fabled Orinoco and Rio Negro rivers. Amazonas is the southern most state of Venezuela, with Colombia to the west and Brazil to the south and the east.

## **Niche market**

"The type of tourism offered by the ORPIA communities appeals to a very small niche of the travel market. It's crucial that ORPIA attract the right type of tourist," Rohr reported during a seminar last winter at IDRC headquarters.

ORPIA was established in 1993 to defend the rights of 19 indigenous groups living in Amazonas, who comprise 70% of the population but remain politically marginalized. Eight communities volunteered to participate in the pilot project, which ORPIA had been planning since 1995, although four dropped out before the actual trip, for various reasons.

### **Technical assistance**

The pilot tour revealed that some of the participating communities may need more technical assistance to meet ecotourists' needs. Indeed, the very concept of tourism was foreign to them. Rohr noted that they could benefit from training in business management, basic accounting, and accommodating special diets. A consultant on the trip also recommended that local guides attempt to learn English, so that the communities need not depend on foreign tour guides.

"It was obvious to us that the communities' past experience with outsiders, their remoteness, even the degree to which their indigenous culture had been assimilated by the Creole culture of Venezuela — for example their fluency in Spanish or their exposure to market economies — played a role in how well they were adapting to ecotourism," she said.

### **Decisions**

Despite some teething problems, indigenous ecotourism has a place in Amazonas, Rohr argued. "The risks are real, but I'd like to think they would be less if the [host] communities are better equipped to make good decisions concerning ecotourism."

She stressed that ORPIA and its consultants, including IDRC, want to ensure that the participating communities retain control over any ecotourism initiative on their lands, and that they are resilient enough to weather new influences. The pilot project was also designed to help promote sustainable development and biodiversity conservation, with the assumption that these goals are linked to sustaining traditional cultural diversity.

### **No panacea**

But ecotourism by itself is not a panacea. In reality, it is a business that brings together two or more vastly different cultural groups under an assumption of hospitality. Because of this, there is an inherent risk that ecotourism can break down traditional cultures. Rohr noted that the ecotourism model developed by ORPIA must be flexible to fit the social, cultural, environmental, and economic realities of each community that decides to start a tourism project.

"Ecotourism can be instrumental in protecting biodiversity and promoting indigenous sustainable development if it is planned, managed, and controlled very carefully," she concluded. "However, this won't just happen naturally. I believe there's a role for development and conservation organizations to play in building local capacities in indigenous communities so they can make decisions in their own best interests and take on the challenges of ecotourism with their eyes open and their hopes high."

*Keane J. Shore is an Ottawa-based writer and editor. (Photo: B. Rohr)*

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[Balancing Environmental Protection and Economic Development](#), by Louise Guénette

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[Creating Ecologically-Based Businesses for the Maya Biosphere Reserve](#), by Kevin Conway

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